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AUTHOR Best, Gary A.
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ABSTRACT

The author suggests that the special education teacher plays an important role in the life of a dying child, and considers the teacher's need for support in the mourning/grief process. (CL)

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Gary A. Best, Ph. D.
Professor of Education
Department of Special Education
California State University, Los Angeles
5151 State University Drive
Los Angeles, California 90032
Phone: (213) 224 - 3525

# DEATH EDUCATION: THE SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHER'S ROLE

The special education teacher plays an important role in the life of the special education student and the family. The concept about death the special education teacher may adopt towards the child who is dying, or who has died may be a model for those with whom the teacher comes into contact. The concept which is encouraged is one which looks at the child as a living child rather than as a dying child or a child who has died.

The impact of the teacher will be significant if interaction with and response to the child and the family is one which centers around the child's living. This approach is not be considered a denial of the child's dying. Rather it is a recognition that although there is acknowledgement of the process of dying and death, the teacher should exert an influence on the life and the living of the child that will be meaningful and worthwhile.

To accomplish this the teacher needs to be aware of the child's concept and knowledge of himself/herself, his/her physical condition, the stages of confrontration with dying and death, not only for the child and his/her family, but also for the teacher and the child's classmates. This awareness may be seen from two hypothetical and separate incidents in which a special education teacher might confront the death of his/her student:

1. A special education teacher has been told that the family of the deceased child requests that the teacher not attend the memorial services.

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2. A special education teacher has been asked to sit with the family during memorial services for the deceased child.

In the two above situations there are significant differences which may be readily seen, but there are also similarities in need. The first instance resulted from the teacher's inability to effectively deal with the living/dying process of the child and hence the family's unwillingness to have the teacher participate in formalized mourning activities. The teacher's discomfort with the terminal illness of the child and his/her educational-personal-pyschological needs resulted in a denial of the teacher and his/her needs in mourning.

In the second case the teacher attended to the living of the child as a need and indeed as a celebration so that in the death of the child the family was able to recognize the importance of the teacher in the life of the child. This recognition is evidenced in the family invitation including the teacher in a very personal level of mourning.

Where these two incidents may be different in both the teacher's ability to satisfactorily manage dying and death, there is a need which must be directed to the teachers in both situations - "Who cares for the care-giver?" Although these are only illustrative examples of what might occur there must be attention given to the needs of the teacher. The teacher has needs which also must be met. While the teacher may be traditionally cast in the mold of "care-giver" he or she also must have care extended to him or her. Teachers also experience the several stages of dying and death confrontation which have been identified in the literature (Kubler-Ross, 1969). To expect that care-givers can continually provide care and support without

being the recipients of care and support in return is unrealistic and lacks recognition of the energy required in the involvement of life. The answer, then, of who cares for the care-giver, may lie in the acknowledgement of care need and the establishment of a support system within the school or agency. This support system may be a known team of persons who can offer support, and/or a procedure available to the care-giver for the expression or management of grief - time off from professional duties or other support as needed or requested.

In conclusion, it can be seen that the teacher does play a significant role in the living of the dying child; the caring of the care-giver must be attended to, and a support system for mourning and grief by care-givers is a component of a professional setting which ought to be readily available.

## REFERENCE

Kubler-Ross, E. On Death and Dying. New York: MacMillan, 1969.